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ABSTRACT

Efforts to achieve greater decentralization, deregulation, and management by objectives in the public sector have left an indelible mark on the school sector in Sweden during the 1980s. The experimental scheme of local agencies and free municipalities illustrates two such reforms. Under the free municipality experiment, a number of municipalities and county councils can, for a three-year experimental period, be exempted from certain state regulations governing local activities. This decentralization has been undertaken with particular ends in view: better adjustment to local needs, integration of schools with other municipal activities, more efficient school administration, and a greater measure of influence for politicians and users. Results show that the introduction of local agencies has done little to bring schools closer to the national goals of decentralization. Hopes of making municipal school districts more efficient and less expensive were not realized, due to conflicts of authority between state and municipality that resulted in more, not less, bureaucratic complexity. (TE)

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APRIL 1987 FIELD - TOPIC 1987:2
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Current Project

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Efforts to achieve greater decentralisation, deregulation and management by objectives in the public sector have left an indelible mark on the school sector during the 1980s. The experimental scheme of local agencies and free municipalities illustrates two such reforms. The experiments with local agencies have made it possible for the latter to acquire administrative and executive duties in both municipal and statutory fields.

Under the free municipality experiment, a number of municipalities and county councils can, for a three-year experimental period, be exempted from certain State regulations governing local activities. This decentralisation has been undertaken with particular ends in view. Through both experiments the State has pursued objectives such as better adjustment to local needs, integration of schools with other municipal activities, more efficient school administration and a greater measure of influence for politicians and users.

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FUNCTIONAL OPPORTUNITIES OF THE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION IN MUNICIPALITIES WITH LOCAL AGENCIES AND FREE MUNICIPALITY EXPERIMENTS

THE BACKGROUND IN BRIEF

Efforts during the 1980s to achieve greater decentralisation, deregulation and management by objectives in the public sector have left an indelible mark on school activities. Every since the 1977/78 school year, one decentralisation reform has succeeded another. The local agency and free municipality experiment exemplifies two such reforms which the NBE has commissioned the Department of Political Science at Göteborg University to evaluate. The research project has two separate parts. The first of these, which has now been concluded, was a study of the impact of the local agency experiments on decentralisation efforts in schools[1]. The second part is a study of the implementation of the free municipality experiment in the school sector.

The local agency experiments have made it possible, from 1980 onwards, for local agencies to be given administrative and executive responsibilities in both municipal and statutory fields. These local agencies vary in structure, but most municipalities have set up sub-municipal boards (KDN). The free municipality experiment (FKF) means that, for a three-year experimental period beginning in 1985, a select number of municipalities and county councils can, on application, be exempted from certain national regulations governing local activities. FKF in the school sector includes among other things opportunities for the more flexible distribution of State grants and school places, greater liberty in filling State-controlled appointments, and opportunities of more flexible organisation and collaboration in school.

This decentralisation has been undertaken with particular ends in view. Through the local agency legislation and FKF, the State wish to achieve several aims: better adjustment to local needs and integration of school activities with other municipal activities, greater administrative efficiency in schools, and more influence for politicians, teachers and other school staff. As regards FKF, it is also the intention for municipalities to be able to obtain exemption from national regula-

tions impeding the development of better forms of co-operation between national and municipal authorities.

METHOD

In the portion of the project relating to the effects of the local agency experiments on decentralisation efforts in schools, an inquiry is made concerning the extent to which schools in school management districts with local agencies have made more progress towards the decentralisation objectives for schools than in other school management districts. This analysis was based above all on questionnaires distributed to head teachers, pupils, parents, teachers and other school staff who had taken part in the school conferences of the various school management districts. A further source of information took the form of personal interviews with local, well-placed actors in the school sector.

Due to delays in the process of applying for exemption, the evaluation of FKF in the school sector has taken the form of an implementation study rather than an effect study. The implementation study is to a great extent based on interviews with well-placed actors and observers at municipal level. The questions asked focus above all on responses at local level to FKF generally and courses of action intended with regard to school affairs.

RESULTS HITHERTO

Experience from the local agency study shows that the introduction of local agencies has done little to bring schools closer to the national goals of decentralisation. Such progress as has been made is confined to two sectors: school integration and user influence.

As regards local school adjustment, the survey shows that the local agencies have had only limited opportunities of developing schools in response to local needs and preferences. The reluctance of local education authorities to give local agencies decision-making powers shows that there is a conflict between the pursuit of a locally adapted

school and the conduct of nationally and municipally uniform teaching. A likely reason for this can be found in the local agency politicians' lack of political experience and competence in school matters.

It has proved easier to co-ordinate municipal activities with KDNs. Even so, the KDNs have often found it difficult to integrate school with other activities. The survey shows that integration opportunities in schools are inhibited by State funding regulations, which prevent State grants being applied to joint activities and services. The integration achievements which can nonetheless be discerned relate above all to the activities taking place in school during school hours.

The local agency experiments were also inspired by hopes of making municipal school administration more efficient and less expensive. Those hopes have not been fulfilled. On the contrary, the survey shows that administration has grown less efficient, due mainly to the division of school mandatorship between State and municipality. Since teaching and other appointments are State-controlled, the local education authority is not empowered under the Local Agencies Act to delegate personnel responsibility for these appointments to local agencies. On the other hand, the LEA can delegate personnel responsibility for municipally controlled appointments. When this has been done, responsibility for school personnel has been divided between two authorities: the LEA and the local agency. This has entailed a growth of personnel administration. The complexity of school administration has been further compounded by budget estimates and the allocation of State resources having to be discussed twice over, viz by the LEA and by the local agency, the reason being that the county education committees can only distribute their resources to local education authorities, not to local agencies.

Some measure of success can be descried regarding the growth of user influence in schools which it was hoped would result from the introduction of local agencies. This applies, for example, to the duty of consultation incurred by head teachers. The introduction of local agencies has been followed by an improvement in this consulting procedure. In sub-municipal areas with local agencies, consultations often

take place at a school conference which, not infrequently, a politician from a local agency is invited to attend. The survey findings also suggest that this inclusion of politicians has resulted in school conferences exerting more influence on the head teacher's decision-making. Otherwise, though, politicians have not acquired more influence through the introduction of local agencies. Most LEAs tend to be very restrictive about transferring duties to local agencies, for fear of losing municipal responsibility for the maintainance of equivalent teaching in all municipal schools. It should at the same time be made clear that the decision-making powers nonetheless transferred by LEAs to local agencies have then often been delegated to head teachers.

The free municipality experiment did not get seriously under way until the spring of 1986, which means that no real effects on the school sector will be discernible until the 1987/88 school year at the earliest. Now that a great deal of the work of interviewing people and collecting data at municipal and county council level has been completed, certain preliminary findings can be outlined. With due regard for the short time for which FKF has been operating in the school sector, observations hitherto suggest that the experiment is hardly likely to contribute towards any sweeping changes, at least not in line with the objectives for FKF.

Exemption applications from municipalities and county councils show that most authorities intend to avail themselves of the majority of exemption opportunities. Field work experience has shown, however, that there is no question of any radical, quantifiable change, for example, in the deployment of State grants. On the other hand one can possibly sense various qualitative changes at local school level, in that head teachers and teaching staffs are being forced to respond in a different way to pupils' needs. In some places this has led to wider co-operation, involving several staff categories.

The biggest change is concerned with the new role which the head teacher is obliged to assume in municipalities with local agencies and which has been reinforced by the more flexible use of State grants permitted by FKF. Several head teachers feel that educational respons-

ibility and management have had to yield pride of place to additional and heavier financial/administrative duties which they are sometimes not qualified to discharge.

For several reasons, the importance of FKF is hard to assess. Firstly, the general preparedness of the free municipalities for change constitutes a problem. In most of the municipalities concerned, several different experiments and reforms are in progress parallel to FKF. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to relate changes and effects to FKF in particular. The municipalities do not regard FKF as the unique experiment which central agencies have made it out to be. Instead the municipalities tend to emphasise the continuity of public efforts towards decentralisation, of which they regard FKF as a natural extention. It is arguable that FKF is accentuating school decentralisation in those free municipalities which have introduced local agencies.

Secondly, FKF seems to have lost steam before it was implemented or even begun. The unique thing about FKF was its reforming strategy, the basic principle of which was for the municipalities themselves to suggest changes to be considered by the Ministry of Education in the fabric of State regulations. Those changes were then to be tried out in the municipalities concerned, and perhaps eventually implemented across the board. The free municipalities have suggested changes, though perhaps not with the wealth of ideas and breadth of scope that was desired, and somewhere along the line FKF has departed from the orginal reforming strategy. In the first place, several fields of exemption have been generalised before even being tested by the free municipalities. The new State grant regulations for upper secondary schools are one such example[2]. Secondly, the free municipalities which have clearly submitted exemption applications with a wealth of ideas have had them partly or wholly rejected. This emasculation has caused a great deal of disappointment and, in some cases, total apathy, and the municipalities maintain that FKF is looking more and more like a case of playing to the gallery.

The experiences described above, although preliminary, undoubtedly lead one to ask why no change has materialised or why the changes actually brought about seem to be so marginal. In the light of experience so far, a good deal of the explanation is probably to be found in relations between central and local level in the school sector, above all in the instruments of school government which people at local level feel they have access to. The task of trying to find out why reforms like FKF have such difficulty in striking root and leading to changes in the school sector falls partly outside an implementation study of FKF. But questions concerning real steering instruments at different levels in the school sector are well worth asking.

TIME FRAME

The part of the research project concerned with studying the importance of the Local Agencies Act in the school sector has been concluded and finalised. A report on findings from the implementation study of FKF in the school sector will be presented in December 1987. The materialisation or otherwise of a study of effects of school questions within the FKF framework will depend on how experimental activities develop during the coming year.

The study of school questions within FKF is an important part of a wider context. The Riksdag resolution and the Government's directive require the National and Local Government Advisory Panel to take charge of the overall evaluation of FKF. The Department of Political Science at Göteborg University has therefore been commissioned by the panel to compile an evaluation programme for FKF[3]. Accordingly, the final report on school questions in relation to FKF will be presented as part of this wider research programme.

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